

The Proof of the Pudding

Cheetham Primary Academy

Introduction

Beyond its nutritional and health values, food has a powerful role in social relationships; it is often the centre of attention at community gatherings and can bring the family together at home. Food and cookery can be used to teach crucial nutrition lessons, but also to build relationships between families and strengthen links in the community.

How can a school use food to achieve these strong connections between families and communities? How resourceful and innovative cookery initiatives bring about improved health outcomes?

Origins of the project

Based near Cheetham Hill Road in Manchester, Cheetham Primary Academy places importance on food and its preparation; food is viewed as an essential part of life and an important tool for building relationships between families and within the local community.

Cheetham Hill Road is one of Britain's most diverse streets; over 30 languages are spoken within two square miles. The school has over 600 pupils, most of whom are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The neighbourhood and school also face challenges associated with deprivation – unemployment is high and rates of educational attainment are low. The academy aims to create a positive community that embraces the students' diverse cultures, encouraging an active approach to learning.

Partnership working

Cheetham participates in the national scheme 'Families and Schools Together' (FAST), in which families are regularly invited to eat their evening meal at the school over eight weeks.

Approach and delivery

The school offers a wide variety of food and cookery-related activities. These are aimed at teaching the importance of healthy eating, while also developing confidence, curiosity and communication skills.

One programme covers four interlinked areas that give experiences across several creative disciplines. 'Cook It' encourages children to cook for themselves; 'Grow It' gets children to grow their own fruits and vegetables; 'Ask It' discusses a variety of topics to build children's powers of reasoning and decision-making; while 'Film It' develops children's familiarity with media and technology.

These sessions have been integrated with subjects on the curriculum. For instance a historical lesson is delivered by illustrating the impact of rationing on making a cake. As a result of combining cookery with Grow It sessions, pupils have grown rhubarb in the school garden to make a dessert. The lessons encourage balance and ownership over diet, giving understanding of where food comes from and how pupils are involved in the process.

The school has also launched a 'Come Dine With Dads' (CDWD) initiative, modelled on the TV show. Pupils' male role models (including fathers, uncles, brothers, grandfathers) sign

up to take part in cooking sessions, covering a variety of dishes and healthy cooking techniques. The project is very popular and is consistently oversubscribed.

45 children have been involved with the sessions alongside their role models. 10 families, considered to be more difficult to reach, have been engaged, including those experiencing language barriers, separated parents, children with special educational needs, families experiencing domestic violence and those under Child Protection Services.

The cost of running CDWD is small. The original six-week block of CDWD sessions was funded by Zest, a Manchester based healthy living project. The cost of ingredients is now funded by the school and an optional donation from participants.

Whilst the hope is that fathers will be encouraged to cook with their children in the future, the school's chief aim is for families to continue communicating and collaborating on activities.

Success and outcomes

The food and cookery projects at Cheetham Primary Academy have improved understanding of nutrition, raised engagement and pupil attainment, and strengthened families. Children's confidence, motivation, behaviour and interest in learning has been observed to improve.

Thanks to the FAST programme, parent involvement with the school was found to increase by 400 per cent; parent-school contact increased by 31 per cent; and total parental involvement increased 111 per cent.

Future plans and obstacles

Both Ali McKernan, higher teaching assistance, and Jenny Wildgoose, assistant principal, describe Come Dine With Dads as an overwhelmingly positive experience, but admit there are challenges. It has been important to recognise that many children may not have a father or male role model to accompany them; in such cases mothers and grandmothers are able to attend.

Conclusion

The challenges of a diverse and deprived community have been used as keys to address the poor health outcomes in the Cheetham area and head off difficulties of divisions within the community. Good food is at the heart of this. Food is employed as a way of uniting fathers and sons, and bringing families and communities closer together.

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